Gazing upon Napoleon’s disintegrating shoes at an 1855 exhibition, Victorian journalist George Augustus Sala imagines an alternative course of history. Remarking that “for want of boots—for he had no money to buy them—Napoleon Buonaparte could not go to the Indies,” Sala speculates that “if those boots could have been obtained . . . there would probably have been no eighteenth Brumaire, no empire of France, no kingdom of Italy, no Russian campaign, no Austrian marriage, no Spanish ulcer, no Moscow, no Waterloo, no St. Helena.” Engaging in counterfactual speculation whose crux is Napoleon’s footwear, Sala exemplifies a tendency of Victorian British thinkers to comprehend the recent past by pondering seemingly superficial indicators of historical distance and their relationship to larger demographic, socioeconomic, and ideological shifts. While the condition and style of Napoleon’s shoes reflect the passage of time, they also allow Sala to meditate on historical causality. Their continued survival, furthermore, prompts a fantasy animated by a complicated layering of past upon present, one that ultimately theorizes the nature of history itself. My book project examines the way Victorian literary texts narrate the transition from past to present in order to engage debates about literary-historical periodization in the long nineteenth century and to reconsider the intellectual and political stakes of Victorian historicisms that scholars often dismiss or malign.

How the Victorians Invented the Regency: Historicizing the Recent Past argues that Victorian literary responses to the Napoleonic Wars and Regency period (1800-1820) generated non-deterministic, non-teleological theories of history that contrast with the narratives of progress typically associated with the Victorians. In literary representations of the recent past, the early years of the century are often crudely delimited as the materialistic, oversexed foil to a staid, moral Victorian modernity, and yet these stereotypes belie that the relationship of past to present was hotly contested. In fact, the Napoleonic Wars and the Regency period were a persistent challenge to totalizing visions of History on a grand scale, whether the secular and systematic models of G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, or the gradualist progressivism of Whig historiography. In Victorian historical thinking, the early nineteenth century was a sort of limit case, too near to be apprehended fully, that produced a messy array of ideas about causality and experience and challenged the models of history that seemed straightforwardly to explain the remoter past.

Chapter 1 examines representations of historical clothing and other ephemeral objects in William Makepeace Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1848) and Thomas Hardy’s The Trumpet-Major (1880), two texts that eschew Georg Lukács’s influential criteria for historical fiction and instead embrace what he calls “costumery.” These novels satirize the earliest years of the nineteenth century as obsessed with rapidly changing clothing fashions, suggesting that history, like fashion, is something with which characters are struggling to keep up. Yet a closer analysis indicates a more complicated relationship between clothing and time, characterized, in some passages, by rapid change, but in others, by stasis, or retrograde or cyclical motion, dramatizing that the experience of history is relative to the individual’s geographical and social placement. Furthermore, I argue that Vanity Fair and The Trumpet-Major adapt the trope of the encounter between the historical figure and the fictional character into a fleeting celebrity sighting in order to suggest that historical agency is not only shifting between actors, but is radically de-centered and just out of reach, reframing Lukács’s “costumery” as a historiographical style particularly apt for a past that bleeds into the present.
Chapter 2, “‘Ladies Scorn Dates!’: Women Life-Writers Look Back on the Regency,” analyzes nonfictional accounts of the kind of encounters with historical figures fictionalized by Thackeray and Hardy. In readings of Harriette Wilson’s *Memoirs* (1825), the Countess of Blessington’s *Conversations of Lord Byron* (1832-33), and Elizabeth Abell’s *Recollections of the Emperor Napoleon* (1844), I argue that these works prefigure the “great man” theory of history that Thomas Carlyle advances in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841). I trace the way these writers use nonlinear models of temporality to defamiliarize the period of their youth, theorizing a break between the Regency past and an emerging Victorian present. Their vision of the Regency as a separate and self-contained era, resistant to narratives of progress and historicized through conversation, contributes to a gendered historiography of the early nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 analyzes the way *roman à clef* characters in Victorian realist novels like Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) and Benjamin Disraeli’s political trilogy (1844-47) represent the residua of earlier historical moments. As a starting point, I return to my analysis of *Vanity Fair*’s Lord Steyne, whom contemporaries speculated was based upon a notoriously debauched Regency aristocrat, deceased shortly before the novel’s publication in the 1840s. I go on to study how the characterization of Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House* subtly suggests that he is based on a real individual, while at the same time it serves to satirize outdated behavior, suggesting the ways that Victorian realism is indebted, for its literary characters, to a cast of historical characters from the early years of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 4, “The Johns Murray and Publishing’s Invention of the Regency,” uses the John Murray publishing house as a case study of the way that Victorian publishing theorized the Regency as a literary period, distinct from Romanticism. I analyze the self-reflexive historical meditations in the Murrays’ Victorian periodicals and institutional histories, which highlight connections between writers that were based upon contemporaneous commercial success rather than thematic or ideological consonance. Through these texts, we see the Victorian afterlives of a number of successful writers—like Byron and Scott—who were understood to be both embedded in and yet able to transcend their historical moment. I contrast the Murrays’ management of their archive with unsympathetic depictions of their circle in Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* (1826), its 1853 revision, and a spurious pornographic work, documenting a complicated struggle between different ways to access literary history. Finally, in light of the Murray archive, I analyze the way Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers* (1888) imagines the Victorian fate of the letters of a fictional Romantic poet, demonstrating a tension between literary antiquarianism and nascent scholarly modes of historicism.

Whereas Chapter 4 traces encounters with the past mediated through archival documents, Chapter 5 examines objects as touchstones of history. “A Taller Napoleon: The Historical Effigy in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture,” analyzes the broken busts and shattered figurines of Napoleon Bonaparte that appear in William Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris* (1823), Dickens’s *Pictures in Italy* (1846), Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Six Napoleons” (1905), and Hardy’s *The Dynasts* (1903-1908). I argue that these fictional objects, and the real ones they represent, depict Napoleon’s body as a composite of separate parts that never quite resolve into a single whole, prompting imaginative thought about historical roads not taken. In a strangely literal way, these texts ponder the Napoleon complex by considering whether Napoleon’s short stature had some sort of causal role in history. They provide a way for Victorian writers to ask: to what extent is the course of history shaped by the body and its accoutrements over and above the historical actor they contain?
The final chapter builds upon my examination of the figure of Napoleon in Chapter 5, while it also circles back from objects to texts, returning to the study of historical fiction that shaped Chapter 1. Chapter 6 examines the Victorian reception of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1869), a novel both historical in its content and, from a British perspective especially, retrograde in its literary form. British reviews and letters about *War and Peace* thus speak to Victorian debates about the way that political histories shape literary histories—debates that still simmer in our study of Victorian literature, a field delimited, unlike its neighbors Romanticism and Modernism, by the reign of a queen.

Part of a turn toward time as a subject and an axis of analysis in Victorian studies, my project considers Victorian responses to some of the same questions—about changes in mores, continuity and rupture, and the diversity of historical experience—that drive our scholarly debates about how and why to study the nineteenth century in the twenty-first. As the Victorians stood in relation to their early nineteenth-century predecessors, so we stand in relation to the Victorians, struggling to make sense of a past to which we are indebted and from which we have not yet escaped. At the same time, my project reconsiders the place of historicism as a scholarly method and a pedagogical tool in literary studies by looking at the Victorian pre-history of the historicisms that scholars practice, even as we experiment with neoformalism and engaged presentism. My work aims to change our understanding of how other eras understood their pasts, bringing a new perspective to bear on some of the foundational questions of literary studies—how does literature engage with history, and what is the status of the literary past in an ever-changing present?